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Moving beyond the global war on terror: Security developments in Somalia

Abdulkadir Osman Farah

Introduction

The tragic events of 911 paved the way for Horn of Africa's reentrance into the forefront of the global conflict and security debates. The horrific attacks emanating from Afghanistan had major consequences for the Horn, particularly Somalia. Apart from sharing common colonial history and traditional clan structured societies, Afghanistan and Somalia share numerous similarities. Both countries represent an extreme form of failed states and with regard to development the two Muslim countries repeatedly occupy at the bottom of global development indicators¹. In addition the countries suffer from protracted civil wars exacerbated by hatred invested local armed factions that seem to enjoy and see no alternatives to widespread lawlessness.

In the past the Horn was, more or less voluntarily, drawn into a different but not lesser vicious global politics. During the cold war superpower rivalry, with pronounced geopolitical motivations, fostered alliances with state elites in the region. The Americans and Soviets fiercely competed for access to important strategic locations. They did this by securing formal cooperation from the Authoritarian regimes. In return the two countries donated modern weaponry and military training.

The renewed interest this time aims, at least officially, beyond accessibility to vital strategic locations. The declared objectives include pursuing potential fugitives allegedly seeking refuge in the region, especially in unstable Somalia with the assumption that this country represents a legitimate governance and security threat not only to the region but to the wider international system. This shift of strategy appears to be an integral part of the wider dominant discourse of the emerging political economy of danger (Lacher, 2008). Ideally the international political system consists of more or less sovereign states or entities with some sort of internal and external legitimacy. Practically the world is hierarchically structured presenting numerous security challenges and dilemmas (Vinci, 2008).

This paper discusses the rationale behind the global war on terror and the incorporation of the Horn of Africa, particularly Somalia where the war caused serious socio-economic and political setbacks. Apart from killing thousands of innocent people, internally and externally displacing millions and devastating public infrastructure, the paper argues that the war negatively impacted the locally generated successful reconciliation processes. In the past decade an increasingly successful vibrant civil society succeeded achieving

quantifiable gains in promoting a bottom up political culture and system (Menkhaus, 2007). The paper concludes with suggestions to moving forward.

The concept of terrorism

The concept of terrorism refers to the premeditated use of threat or the obvious application of violence and intimidation for the purpose of obtaining political or social objectives². It remains controversial though of which actions constitute a terrorist act, which initiates and sponsorships may lead to a possible terror operation. Does an act of terrorism equal a war? Obviously proponents of an eternal global religious conflict insist that terrorist incidents represent a real global war between good and evil and civilized contra barbaric etc.

Depending on who interprets, in given situation and circumstance, different forms of terrorism with multiple legitimacy and methods of applications exist. There are terrorist acts inspired by previous acts of revolutionary terrorism, a description originating from the French revolution. There are also those that conduct some sort of racial terrorism, which is associated with the activities conducted by the brutal apartheid regime in South Africa. In between the two one finds a religiously inspired terrorism. Some analysts classify terror activities into a heroic terrorism, a legitimate action for fighting national freedom and understandable cause with the application of acceptable methods, and horrific terrorism, an illegitimate action of terror with ignoble means (Mazrui, 2006). People who fight for self-determination and independence through armed resistance conduct heroic terrorism, while self-proclaimed individuals and groups who spread anxiety and death among civilians carry out horrific terrorism.

Furthermore the concept of terrorism appears dynamic and multi-dimensional. In the past we saw that the terrorists of today can become the freedom fighters, or possibly the peace makers, of tomorrow. The Mandela and Arafat cases are good examples of formerly western designated terrorists turning Nobel laureates. Conversely former western trained and funded so-called freedom fighters from the era of the cold war transformed themselves into intimidating lethal global terrorists. Al-Qaida and associates qualify this description.

War rationale and implications

The media simplistically depicts the ongoing conflict as an aggression initiated by fanatic young Arab terrorists that masterminded and executed a devastating daring attack against the most powerful nation in the world in 9/11 2001. With its vast military, economic and political power America wields enormous power that affects much of the world (Sterling, 2008). The country has therefore a legitimate right to respond and defend its sovereignty. Initially most of the world, including the Muslim world, sympathized with the people of America in condemning the 9/11 attacks as an unforgivable crime against humanity (Rehman, Javaid, Ghosh, Saptarshi, 2008). For Muslims an act of terrorism is by nature anti-Islamic and is strongly forbidden in the holy teachings.

The problem is that it is difficult to assess and draw conclusions on still unfolding conflict (Witt, Matthew T., deHaven-Smith, Lance, 2008). Most will, however, argue that the war in Afghanistan was justified as the alleged terrorists and their sponsors resided and operated from this war torn country. The initial response by the Americans was understandable as the UN unanimously approved the American response. But in order to get the whole picture, one needs to closely examine the structural challenges and uncertainties the world experienced during the post cold war period.

Following the collapse of the bipolar world system, America imposed a uni-polar system that presumed western hegemony convincing America to pursue a unilateral world order. On the rhetorical side proclamations, such as the end of history and the clash of civilization, superficially placed the liberal western world vision at the centre of global military and economic power. This liberal approach justified U.S. primacy and had uncritically acquired the blessing of the media elites (Rojecki, Andrew, 2008). In response marginalized global constituents, with more or less legitimate grievances, decided to challenge the status quo of the balance of power.

In addition the ambition of personal exclusive gains fueled the conduct of this war. For instance, since the early days of the war on terror the insurance industry and other privately owned firms played an instrumental role in the management of the global war on terror (Aradau, Claudia; van Munster, Rens, 2008). The unilateral declaration of superiority led to the rise of religious extremism which America in past supported to undermine the Soviets. The conflict also introduced mounting Islam phobic sentiments in the west (Panagopoulos, Costas, 2006)

Therefore the so-called war on terror reflects the failure of the presumed American dominated global order. The conflict not only immensely derailed world peace for decades but also introduced a political economy of danger in the form of global anxiety and constant surveillance that the world will have to deal with for generations.

Another important aspect is that the war was offensively marketed by mutually antagonists as having a global scope. Closer inspection, however, reveals that this is not the case as the conflict concentrates on certain regions and countries- with expanded focus

on security and surveillance in the west. Most of the actual operations and the subsequent suffering of innocent civilians take place in developing countries, particularly in the Muslim world (Menkhaus, Ken, 2007). So the burden of the war appears not fairly distributed. In terms of human loss and displacement similar obvious difference prevail between countries belonging to the core vs. periphery, Muslims Vs. non-Muslims. For instance major frontlines situate in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, with severe humanitarian consequences for the population of the concerned countries.

Expanding the war to the Horn-Somalia

The Horn, one of the most impoverished corners of the world, abruptly acquired the so-called “third front status” of the war on terror. For Afghanistan, terrorists allegedly planned attacks from there. As far as Iraq is concerned an unpredictable dictator, with possible WMD, might invite a preemptive strike. For the Horn political economists of fear projected the region as potentially hosting fugitives committed to create an alternative “jihad factory” in the region. The main argument was that a lawless Somalia, a country without government, could be exploited as a terrorist base. For the incorporation of the Horn, and thereby Somalia, into the war, a concerted discourse leveling the three Muslim countries, Somalia-Sudan-Yemen, as the Red Sea tri-angle of terror emerged. Obviously no empirical evidence supported the propagation that the Horn of Africa represented a direct and immediate threat to the US or its Western allies. On the other hand, the region, or at least Somalia, had partially contributed to the distraction of the post cold war American order. Popularly the Somalis consider the terror paradigm against the region as revenge against the Somalis on the failed American military mission in Mogadishu in 1992³. Furthermore Somalia locates in a key strategic region providing proximity to the Gulf and international sea ways.

Developments in Somalia

America’s more or less deliberate mischievous acts in Somalia include the US’s support of the military dictatorship in Somalia in the 1980s and Bush senior and Clintons failed intervention in 1993 (Alexander, 1994). Following the devastating Somali civil war, some autonomous and relatively stable Somali regions emerged. Somaliland and Puntland had through bottom up civil society mechanism managed to build regional administrations, while Mogadishu and some parts in the South experienced the intensification of violence (Piles, 1993). Despite the systemic brutality by warlords in Southern Somalia, resilient

Somalis filled the vacuum in creating an environment of entrepreneurship and businesses expansion. This has raised the speculation that the anarchy may after all not be bad for Somalia's development. The Eurocentric state system remained always alien to Africa and dictatorships never improved welfare but abused and reduced the common wellbeing. In Somalia the government's collapse and subsequent emergence of statelessness opened the opportunity for Somalia progressing, making many parts of the country better off with renewed vibrancy of critical sectors of the economy (Leeson, 2006). Furthermore significant changes have occurred in the nature and intensity of conflict in Somalia. Since mid 1990s conflicts became more localized and less bloody due to criminality constraining mechanism based on customary law and private security forces (Menkhaus, 2006).

The year 2009 began with some improvements and optimism. Two years of brutal invasion and oppression by the authoritarian regime in Addis and its allied Somali warlords ended after sustained legitimate insurgency by various Somali groups. For the population the cost was huge. About 18.000 killed and millions displaced internally and externally. On the Ethiopian side, apart from the economic expenses, unannounced number of Ethiopian Soldiers perished.

It remains a mystery why the regime in Addis suddenly decided to abandon its closely allied Somali warlords. Obviously the change of administration in Washington is relevant. The Obama administration declared its intension to focus on domestic challenges and reiterated its careful reexamination of its involvement in international wars. From this perspective the new American administration alters the US's and UN's hitherto approaches in viciously undermining this impoverished and suffering region. Many of the troubles that confront countries such as Somalia could have been internally manageable if the so-called American initiated Operation Restore Hope and the discredited UNISOM efforts never took place. The proliferation of warlords and arms were the obvious outcome of these failed operations.

Following the American involvement coupled with the Ethiopian invasion, terrorist incidents in Somalia become frequent, including actions that target local civilians and humanitarian agencies. In October 2008, radical groups conducted deadly terrorist acts in Hargeisa, the capital city of Somaliland and in the coastal town Bosaaso, the economic capital of the autonomous region of Puntland. Whoever committed these horrendous crimes had no respect for anyone and any region whether in the south or in the north. Governmental offices and UN agencies were targeted. Most of those killed were innocent civilians. Prior to the current political and economic unrest Boosaaso was close to be called the Beirut (the old Beirut) of the Horn of Africa. Similarly Hargeisa attracted Somalis from all regions and from the Diaspora. With substantial Somali cosmopolitan presence in Hargeysa, the terror had no further implications as irrational sentiments were controlled by the civil society. Most Somalis considered the attacks against the invading Ethiopian

army as legitimate heroic act while they agree on their condemnation of terror attacks against civil targets as illegitimate act of horrific terrorism.

Some elements (estimated less than a 1000 individuals) in the resistance movement could be extremely dangerous not only for the international system but also for the attempts by other Somalis to establish viable political and economic system. It is here where the UN and other western organizations are actively fueling the conflict. They continue to provide funds for the predatory warlords. Even the recently Djibouti agreement that constructed the new Somali leadership is not sincere. Here the UN unilaterally dictated the imposition of the so-called moderates and empowered them to occupy higher positions of the transnational government. If the US, EU and UN stay involved we might see renewed violence. Empirical facts on the ground in Somalia suggest that external involvement has been and continues to be the main source of obstacle for lasting peace in Somalia. All the locally working solutions in Somalia (North-Central-South) were created by non-donorised indigenous traditional-religious constituents.

In the past few months a process to de-radicalize conservative armed elements and incorporate them into some sort of power sharing is taking off from the ground. Whether a western funded reconciliation initiatives to build bridges between armed secular groups and radical religious movements is an open question. Recently in a BBC interview the conservative Somali cleric Sheikh Aweys in Asmara insisted that there will be no peace as long as external actors are involved. Islamists in Somalia consider the internal Somali conflict as a minor issue, easily solvable as soon the external challenge is no more. They confidently state that there exists no major impenetrable conflict among the Somalis. Even the idea that Somalis cannot resolve their problems is an external invention and myth, they insist. They know most Somalis are anti-colonial and anti-subordination; therefore in exploiting this fact the Somali Islamists have a rational a case. Many Somalis are, nonetheless, not fans of Sheikh Aweys, a man hunted by US security agencies, but in this decisive period of Somali history, this aging military officer who turned Sheikh has some legitimate and consistent arguments. He holds fast on the idea that all Somalis are Muslims; Islamic principles should therefore rule Somalia. Only through this process will Somalis be able to eliminate clanism and recurring anarchy. Due to the prolonged civil war many people, including probably the Sheikh himself, might qualify to be criminals, but internally, when the country is under siege and occupation, people remain united and direct attention to the bigger external enemies. When external oppression and interference ends, Somalis could either choose to bring justice to those that committed crimes or instead chose to pursue forgiveness and national reconciliation, or possibly combine both. Even in advanced democratic societies, internal division and opposition is normally suspended or ignored during periods of external threat and challenge.

During a short period of 6 months Aweys and Islamic Courts Union (ICU) succeeded to stop years of senseless violence in some parts of Southern Somalia. There is no reason to

object why they would not be able to repeat the success, if external actors- particularly those with anti-Islamic sentiments, refrain interference in Somalia.

The newly elected Somali president generated internal and external debate on whether he is up to the task. Sheikh Sharif could be a prominent respected leader in Somalia if clanism and anarchy is contained. Due to probably his Islamic scholarship and urban background, he appears not infected by vicious clanism and corruption, two major qualities that any potentially successful Somali leader must not possess. In addition Sharif belongs to a generation that is fortunate on one hand and unfortunate on the other. It is a generation that grew up during a revolutionary Somalia with relative security and free education in their mother tongue. In other ways they are very unfortunate as due to the successive corrupt older generations such as warlords Aidid , Yusuf, Ali Mahdi and many others, never bothered providing younger generations with peaceful transition and progressive upward mobility.

Two years ago, two arrogant men, Bush and Malez grossly underestimated (despite recurring internal instability and civil war) the capability of Somali people to defend their country. At least it seems that the new administration in Washington learned a lesson by slowly transforming the baseless rhetoric of the so-called war on global terrorism. Clearly Obama is an American and he will pursue American interests, but his administration is already changing relations with the outside world, particularly with the Muslim world. For instance he suggested the closure of Guantanamo prison, withdrawal from Iraq, that he will not support the presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia. In an interesting move his administration recognized and congratulated the election of Sheikh Sharif (an Islamist leader with Islamist movement that America considered jihadist fought battles against). Recently in an exclusive interview with Al-Arabia satellite TV, Obama stated that he understands the Muslims as he, as a child, lived and went to school in Indonesia. Of course it will take more than one man to genuinely transform the American political culture/system but Obama is a new type of leader as Sheikh Sharif is, therefore it is possible that they will make some sort of difference.

With the election of Sheikh Sharif Somalia is heading towards a positive direction. The only way to prevent Somalia from becoming a fertile ground for international terrorist groups is to help stabilize the country. In order to achieve this objective, it is crucial to adopt initiatives aiming at strengthening Somalia's civil society (Tripodi, 2005).

The war on terror was an unjust war. Apart from the human cost- mass death and displacement, countries invaded and destroyed- political and economic setbacks aggravated. More seriously warlords and authoritarian rulers adopted and employed the war rhetoric for power consolidation. At the regional level animosities were created (prior

to the war, migration and border businesses flourished with people in the region interacting).

Most damaging so far is the disruption of the locally created indigenous Somali order during the post state collapse. Through the combination of Xeer- Somali customary laws- and Sharia to resolve and mange local disputes, many parts of the country adopted and established a relative peace. Within the framework of the new terrorist paradigm, respected civil society groups in Somalia and beyond were accused of potential terrorists. At the same time warlords received clandestine funding and became important members of the alliances of willing (Dagne, 2002). The war on terror took extremism and radicalization among the Somalis into higher levels, especially the growing concern among the youth and Diasporas, posing serious future challenges⁴.

⁴ Amran Abukar, On the Menace of the Vanishing Somali Youth, www.wardheernews.com, March 01, 2009

Concluding remarks

The conflict in Somalia remains complex to understand and thereby intricate to resolve. In order to overcome pressing issues involved actors need to sincerely cooperate and compromise. At the moment the region needs a new approach different from the destructive and discredited past of colonialism, dictatorship and unilateral wars. With a new administration in Washington, at least the political rhetoric might change from a war and power driven intimidation to a more nuanced thinking of international relations.

The Somalis need an opportunity and space to consider and construct their destiny. Interestingly the few occasions in the past the Somalis experienced noninterference they resolved their disagreements peacefully (the case Puntland, Somaliland, Islamic courts period illustrate this success). These positive locally initiated developments occurred when the attention of the world was not focused in Somalia. In addition no rational explanation for the Somali conflict exists (been homogeneous nation) except for the recurring factionalism linked to external involvement and sponsorship.

Most observers agree that Somalis have now, in the form of relatively young enlightened leadership, coupled with people been tired of conflicts and longing for peace, a better opportunity of finding lasting solutions. Obviously Somalia is not an island and international interest and interaction will continue but a positive external involvement will rather be complementary.

Furthermore it seems that Somalis might be ready to embrace a form of an Islamic rule that many assume might restore social justice, moral ethics and legitimate power structure. Whether the international community equally accepts the Somali intensions and wishes remains doubtful. Similar to many other African countries, Somalis never had, in modern times, an opportunity to establish their own independent political structures. That is probably why all imposed structures failed. The time has come to let indigenous structured systems emerge. A progressive modern Islamic version might promote horizontal cohesion among the Somalis and help them overcoming past grievances. Paradoxically the obvious and most serious challenge to the approach of Islamic governance comes from the armed radical groups in the country. They want to assert an Islamic rule but preferably a version based on their own interpretations. These armed radical groups represent a minority in Somalia. Most of the Somalis belong to the Sufi branch of Islamic thought.

Some observers view the situation in Somalia as serving as an exit political opportunity for the west to employ conflict resolution approach in reaching out Somali Islamists through political co-optation with the aim to disaggregate the global radical Islamic movement,

active jihad and forge better relationship with the Islamic world (Stevenson, Jonathan, 2007).

Whatever legitimate or illegitimate concerns outsiders might have, statelessness, anarchy, extremism and mismanagement in Somalia could only be overcome if Somalis independently determine their destiny. In this endeavor the country needs to regroup and constructive use its scattered human capital among the Diaspora. A new transnational Diaspora incorporated developmental approach linked to the vibrant civil society and local administrative structures in the country would certainly constitute functioning reliable building blocks to restore stable peace and statehood in Somalia.

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